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THOMSON'S CLANDESTINE PASSAGE AROUND
NACOGDOCHES.*

W. P. ZUBER.

In 1830, after the passage of the exclusion act, a large body of families sent by Sterling C. Robertson from Tennessee were conducted into Texas by Alexander Thomson.† Before reaching Nacogdoches, they learned that they could not pass the garrison at that place without passports, and they encamped about three miles east of that town.

Mr. Thomson and two other men went into Nacogdoches to confer with Colonel Piedras. They stated their condition to the colonel, and requested him to permit the families to pass. Piedras had no authority to comply with their request, and so informed them. They then said that, if the immigrants would consent to do so, they would change their destination to Austin's colony, and asked Colonel Piedras whether they could pass thither. He replied that they could do so only after procuring permits from Austin, and advised them, if they should so decide, to let the families stay in their present encampment while a messenger should proceed to San Felipe and procure the needed permits from Austin. They told him that they would return to the camp and try to persuade the immigrants to do as he advised, but they thought that two or three days might elapse before they could determine what to do. But they promised to come again and inform Colonel Piedras of whatever decision the immigrants should make.

They returned to their encampment, and reported to their friends their interview with Colonel Piedras. They soon determined what to do. On the next day, they cut a road around Nacogdoches. This required comparatively little work: the opening of two connecting roads, through open woods, between that on which they were encamped and another, nearly parallel with it, which lay

*I narrate these facts from my own knowledge, as I do not know that they have ever yet been published.

†He spelled his name Thomson, not Thompson.

about a mile north of Nacogdoches. Thus their route led from their encampment, or from a point a little west of it, nearly north to another road; thence with said road nearly west to a point several miles northwest of Nacogdoches; and thence nearly south to a point on the San Antonio road a few miles west of Nacogdoches.

On the following morning, very early, the families decamped and proceeded for their destination in Robertson's colony, the beginning of their journey being on their improvised road. But Mr. Thomson and the two men who had previously accompanied him went through Nacogdoches to see Colonel Piedras. They told him that, after thoroughly considering their situation, the immigrants had unanimously determined to settle in Austin's colony, and would stay in their present encampment till receipt of their permits, and that they—Mr. Thomson and the two men with him—were en route for San Felipe to procure the permits, and hoped soon to return and conduct the families into Austin's colony. Piedras wished them God-speed, and they proceeded on their journey. But a few miles west of Nacogdoches, Mr. Thomson and the two others rejoined the families, and they all proceeded together for Robertson's colony.

My father was then in Texas, about twenty-five miles east of Nacogdoches, and soon learned the facts of this passing around that place by Mr. Thomson's immigrants. The same account was confirmed to my father by Mr. Thomson himself at Harrisburgh, Texas, in 1831. His statement to my father was substantially as I have here repeated it.

The road which those immigrants made around Nacogdoches was known as the "Tennesseeans' road," and was used by many subsequent immigrants, who were not provided with passports or permits.

After Thomson's immigrants had passed around Nacogdoches, some gentlemen reported their action to Colonel Piedras. He replied: "I can not recall them. I can not prevent people from passing *around* Nacogdoches, whether their route be half a league or a hundred leagues distant. All that I can do is to prevent intruders from passing through this town."

However, Colonel Piedras, of course, must have reported the affair, both to the State authorities and to the general commanding the troops of the department. This conduct of the immigrants was

regarded by the authorities as treacherous and defiant to the laws, and to the Federal and State governments. Of course, it greatly aggravated—if it did not cause—all the troubles that afterward beset the settlement of Robertson's colony.

Yet justice to Mr. Thomson demands full consideration of the circumstances which impelled his action, which, if they do not justify his conduct, at least greatly diminish the blame due thereto. I can not see that he could have done better. He was under obligation to the Nashville Company, to Robertson, and to the immigrants themselves, to conduct them to Robertson's colony, in which only they were willing to settle. He had conducted them thus far in good faith, anticipating no opposition, but there they were halted; no arrangement could be made to procure passports to their desired destination without a trip to the State capital west of the Rio Grande, either by Robertson, who was in Tennessee, or by a messenger to be sent by him; the delay for such a trip would quite exhaust their funds for travel, which were limited. Yet, they could not otherwise obtain the needed passports. Deluded by the hope that if they could, *by any means*, pass Nacogdoches, they would encounter no further trouble, they adopted the plan, which they executed, of passing clandestinely around that place. Mr. Thomson keenly felt his obligations to his company, to his empresario, and to his immigrants. His condition was extremely distressing. He and his companions adopted this clandestine passage as the best proceeding in their power. I am safe in saying that he would not have done as he did if he had not believed that the circumstances morally justified his action. Both my father and myself knew him as an honorable and conscientious gentleman. His necessity resulted from the seemingly unavoidable neglect of Empresario Robertson to provide for the needed passports.

In January, 1831, my father, with his family, en route from Ayish to Austin's colony, passed around Nacogdoches on the "Tennesseeans' road," which had been improvised by Thomson's immigrants for Robertson's colony, though he had a permit from Austin. My father did so on the entreaty of a Tennessean, who, with his family, had overtaken us, and who had no permit, though he, too, was going to Austin's colony. I have always regretted this incident, for it deprived me of an opportunity to pass through the old historical town of Nacogdoches, which I have never yet seen.